

‘You want some action for this dollar?’:
Gambling for the Plot in *Pursued*
and *The Master of Ballantrae*

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As a reader of the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson I was surprised to recognise in Raoul Walsh's *noir*-Western *Pursued* (1947)¹ a scene from Stevenson's historical novel *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). In the film, the scene takes place during the Spanish-American war of 1898. Recruiting agents have been trawling through New Mexico, mustering forces. In the Callum family, son Adam (John Rodney) and adopted son Jeb Rand (Robert Mitchum) decide that one should enlist, while the other should stay behind to manage the family farm. They agree to use the toss of a coin to determine who should go and who should stay. Adam's sister Thorley (Teresa Wright), who both tosses the coin and calls the toss, is distraught at the outcome of the gamble. She hurls the coin through a window of the family ranch and it pierces the glass, leaving a hole as if a bullet had passed through. The image of the broken window suggests the damage that will be done to the family as a consequence of this arbitrary determination of its sons' futures. The same striking cluster of events initiates the plot of *The*

¹ *Pursued*, dir. Raoul Walsh (United States Pictures/ Warner Bros 1947).

Both story and script were by Niven Busch. Although the screen credits name Milton Sperling as the producer, Busch also played a producing role, and in a 1983 interview claimed that he had 'absolute control' over the film, including choice of cast, crew and cameraman; see David Thomson, 'Niven Busch: A Doer of Things,' in *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood's Golden Age*, ed. Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1986), 106. The film's status as a hybrid of *film noir* and Western has been discussed by Michael Coyne in *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 48, and more fully by Edward Recchia in 'Film Noir and the Western,' *The Centennial Review* 40.3 (1996): 601-614.

Master of Ballantrae. When the Jacobite rebellion breaks out in Scotland in 1745, the Durie family decides to have, politically, a bet both ways, sending one son 'out' with Bonnie Prince Charlie and keeping one at home as a loyal subject of King George (and manager of the family estate). Each of the two brothers, James and Henry, believes he should be the one to fight, and the choice is settled by the toss of a coin. Appalled at the result of the gamble, their 'near kinswoman' Alison Graeme, an orphan who has been brought up as a member of the family, takes the coin and hurls it 'clean through the family shield in the great painted window'.² The hole in the window, although subsequently patched up, remains a sign of unhealed division and difference in the family.



Pursued has clearly recognizable intertexts in the Bible and Greek tragedy, but its similarities to Stevenson's novel have, to my knowledge, gone unremarked. As well as the coin-tossing scene, the two texts share significant aspects of situation and characterisation. Both centre on the

² Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, 1889, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1996), 11, 13. Subsequent references to this work will be included parenthetically in the essay.

jealousy and conflict between a sexually glamorous 'fighting' brother and a dull, almost emasculated 'stay-at-home' brother. Both deal with adoptive relationships, which produce over-determined, at times quasi-incestuous, family roles: Jeb Rand is brother/enemy to Adam Callum and brother/lover to Thorley Callum; Alison Durie is sister/lover to both James and Henry. The aim of this article is not, however, to prove that *The Master of Ballantrae* is an unacknowledged source for *Pursued*.³ Although it seems to me likely that *Pursued*'s screenwriter Niven Busch was influenced, however unconsciously, by a past reading of *The Master of Ballantrae*, it is also possible that the similarities between the two texts are coincidental. Rather than arguing for the influence of Stevenson upon Busch, I am interested in exploring the use made in each text of the coin-tossing motif as a narrative device for — to borrow some terms from Henry James — 'the illustration of character' and 'the determination of incident'.⁴ The use of the same device in both texts makes it possible to see how differences of genre may affect the function of chance in narrative and frame the possibilities for random plotting suggested by the gambling motif. Consequently my discussion is concerned with the form and dynamics of plots rather than with the texture of their narrative embodiment. It offers neither a frame-by-frame analysis of the way the story of *Pursued* is conveyed to the viewer through the medium of filmed action, nor a sentence-by-sentence analysis of the way the story of *The Master of Ballantrae* is conveyed to the reader through the discourse of its two narrators. Rather, it draws upon ideas from narrative theory to explore how chance interacts with generic aspects of narrative to shape and drive the plots under consideration.

From a narrative point of view, the interest of using a coin toss to determine the course of action is that the fall of a coin has no intentions, no reasons and no psychology. It takes no account of the past, but marks an absolute beginning unshaped by previous events. A plot in which every choice is determined by the toss of a coin ought to produce the ideally

³ In his interview with David Thomson, screenwriter Niven Busch noted the 'Greek overtones' of the story, but cited his main inspiration as a newspaper article he read while living in El Paso, Texas, 'about a feud and how a boy, who was the only survivor of the feud, had been brought up by the feuding family that had eliminated the other' (Thomson, 'Niven Busch', 106).

⁴ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) in *Henry James: Literary Criticism*, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1: 55.

'plural' text posited by Roland Barthes, of which he remarked that 'meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice'.⁵ Against this, it may be argued that in fact, like throwing dice,

[t]he toss of a coin ... involves no element of chance. The way it is held when tossed, the velocity with which it is thrown, the height to which it ascends and from which it returns to the palm, determine the way in which it lands. What we call chance, in such an event, refers to the ordinary inability of our senses to gauge these determining conditions; it is shared ignorance which makes coin-tossing feasible as a way of arbitration.⁶

Yet, provided both parties to a coin toss are bound together in their 'shared ignorance' of 'determining conditions' — that is, unless one of them is exposed as a cheat or the possessor of special knowledge — the toss of a coin does produce what is effectively a random outcome. Such randomness is the basis of our sense of probability and its equal chances, which is in turn an important constituent of our sense of what is natural in the course of events. When randomness fails and the law of probability is overturned, the universe takes on the aspect of a baffling intentionality — as shown in the first scene of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, in which the main characters contemplate the fact that 'ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times'. As Guildenstern remarks, the law of probability 'related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature'; the suspension of that law creates a situation that is both absurd and frightening.⁷ *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Pursued* are not set in Stoppard's post-modern world, where such affronts to reason and nature abound. Rather, they depict ostensibly naturalistic worlds, in which a tossed coin ought to have a roughly equal chance of landing either way. But of course fiction is never just like life, and my analysis of the novel and film seeks to establish to what extent and in what ways literary conventions, especially the pressures of genre, deform a naturalistic handling of chance.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 1970, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 6.

⁶ Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, 1959, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 116.

⁷ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18.

In doing so, I aim to establish the extent to which either of these works approaches the 'plural' text posited by Barthes.

In Barthes' theoretical scheme, the ideally plural and indeterminate text is the polar opposite of the 'classic' narrative, in which all elements work together towards an appointed end and a unified meaning.⁸ The drive towards unity in the 'classic' narrative is epitomised by the rhetorical questions Henry James asked in his essay 'The Art of Fiction': 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?'.⁹ Using chance to determine the plot would sever the connection that James proposed as indissoluble. Character would not determine incident, because incident would be determined by chance. Incident would not necessarily illustrate character, for a random selection of narrative outcomes would defy the classic literary text's need to shape and integrate events as expressions of character. Which theoretical model best describes *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Pursued*: the Jamesian model, in which character determines incident? or Barthes' model, in which narrative meaning is subject to no principle of determination except chance?

At first sight, both texts seem to express the classic, Jamesian notion of the sovereignty of character over plot. Few readers of *The Master of Ballantrae* will be surprised to find that the fall of the coin sends dashing, reckless James Durie to fight with Bonnie Prince Charlie, and consigns boring, passive Henry Durie to the part of house-keeper. The role that the coin toss assigns to each brother is perfectly in tune with the already-established character of each. Similarly, few viewers of *Pursued* will be surprised to find that Jeb, a fighter by nature and outsider by experience, is the one selected by chance to go to war, while cautious, calculating Adam

⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, 4, 7-8. Barthes's 'classic' narrative (also called 'the readerly'), in which 'everything holds together', is 'controlled by the principle of non-contradiction'; 'by stressing at every opportunity the *compatible* nature of circumstances, by attaching narrated events together with a kind of logical "paste," it 'prepar[es] its defense against the enemy that may force it to acknowledge the scandal of some illogicality, some disturbance of "common sense"' (156). The indeterminate (or writerly) text, on the other hand, engages with 'the infinite play of the world' without being 'stopped' by any 'singular system ... which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages' (5).

⁹ James, 'The Art of Fiction', 55.

stays at home. Again, the coin toss does not determine identities, but merely confirms what we already know about the characters.

Yet, every gamble has its stake. In his psychoanalytic reading of *Pursued*, Paul Willemen argues that '[t]he game with the coin puts at stake the right to occupy the place of the father',¹⁰ a game that Adam wins. However, it should be remembered that, with these brothers by adoption, there are two fathers in question. While Adam may win the right to replace his father as homesteader and head of the Callum household, in losing the toss Jeb wins his father's status as fighter and lover. The lost gamble prompts Jeb and his adoptive sister, Thorley, to declare their love for each other — a somewhat transgressive love, like the love that, we later learn, Jeb's father had for Thorley's mother. It also sends Jeb to war, where he is represented shooting at unseen enemies; this links him to the absent father who is similarly represented in Jeb's fragmented memories. Adam may gain his father's economic and social authority, but within the film's register of images and values, the coin toss awards Jeb, not Adam, the stronger masculine role. Yet this seems less the result of chance than the confirmation of a genetic inheritance.

Willemen's comment about sons gambling for the father's place also applies, somewhat differently, to *The Master of Ballantrae*. What makes the coin toss here so dangerous is that the war in question — unlike that in *Pursued* — is a civil war and a rebellion. If the rebellion fails, the brother who publicly supports it will not be able to resume his former place in civil, national life. This is the core of Henry's argument as to why he, not James, should fight with the Young Pretender; as the younger son, it will matter less (to the family, to the nation, and to himself) if he forfeits his birthright (12). Henry's argument is sound, but he loses the toss, and while the fall of the coin confirms James's sense of his inherent fitness for adventure, the rest of the family is filled with foreboding when the heir is cast in the role of political rebel. For, if the rebellion fails but James lives — as indeed happens — he will never be able 'to occupy the place of the father'.¹¹ as a proscribed rebel and traitor to the crown, he can never be 'the Master of Ballantrae'. He has put his very identity at stake in his gamble with his

¹⁰ Paul Willemen, 'The Fugitive Subject,' in *Raoul Walsh*, ed. Phil Hardy (Colchester: Vineyard Press, 1974), 82.

¹¹ Willemen, 'The Fugitive Subject,' 82.

brother, and lost. Here is a sense in which character has not determined incident, but chance, determining incident, has determined the identity of a character in a shocking and irrevocable way, which has ramifications for every other character throughout the rest of the novel.

For Henry Durie, the results of the gamble are just as disastrous as for James. He is obliged to assume the position forfeited by his brother, but his authority is fatally undermined by the perception, in those around him, that he has profited by circumstances of which James was the victim. James unfairly taunts him as a Jacob to his Esau (12, 74, 93) — as one who has tricked him out of his inheritance — when the gamble was, in fact, James's own idea. Henry's situation is impossible, for he is cast in the role of pretender to a title he never wanted and cannot abdicate. Because of the way the coin fell, neither brother can really be 'the Master of Ballantrae', making the title, both of the family and the book, an empty cipher.¹²

The toss of the coin also changes Alison Graeme's life. Her roles in the family are, like Jeb's in the Callum family, over-determined. A cousin to James and Henry, she has been brought up like their sister, but with the family expectation that she will marry the heir (her property will safeguard the estate). When James, whom she loves, is presumed dead in the aftermath of Culloden, his father persuades her, against her inclination, to marry Henry. James later returns, determined to blight his brother's life as he feels his own has been ruined. When he surreptitiously courts Alison, his status as her brother-in-law lends an incestuous as well as adulterous edge to the relationship. James's justification for his behaviour is that Henry has stolen his life: 'he sits in my place, he bears my name, he courts my wife' (58). But Henry has stolen nothing; the fall of the coin, which James himself chose to toss, has awarded to Henry the life James should have had. It has also entwined the lives of the two brothers far more closely than would otherwise have been the case; although James's motiveless animosity towards his brother stems from childhood, it would have far less material to work with if his gamble had not turned out the way it did.

¹² Alan Sandison explores the deconstructive effects of Stevenson's decision to take as the title of his novel 'a title to which no one is entitled, a sign without a referent'; see *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 270-73. Adrian Poole discusses the uncertainly surrounding the meaning of the title as part of Stevenson's complex play with the notion of 'mastery' ('Introduction,' in Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, xvii-xviii).

Similarly, in *Pursued* the coin toss does not initiate the conflict between the brothers, but is a powerful catalyst for its escalation. Adam Callum and his adoptive brother Jeb Rand have always fought, but from the point that Jeb loses the gamble and goes to war, their conflict is set on a path of increasing intensity that can only end with one killing the other. When Jeb returns a decorated war hero, he is publicly fêted and privately adored: glamour, glory and the girl are all his. This feeds Adam's jealousy as he complains that there are no medals for cattle-ranchers (a grievance suggested by his murderous kinsman Grant Callum, whose role in the plot is discussed below). Later Adam accuses Jeb of living off the ranch's profits without working for them; his feelings of resentment are very similar to those of Henry Durie, who also (in this case with more justice) regards the brother returned from the war as a drain on the estate that he has built up in his absence. Obsessed with his 'ledger' and 'tally', Adam shares Henry's prudent bookkeeping mentality, and is infuriated when the more reckless, profligate brother seems to be getting a free ride. In this, the biblical parable of the prodigal son is undoubtedly the ur-text for both novel and film, as Stevenson at least makes explicit (77).

Adam is also infuriated by the love-relationship between his sister Thorley and his adopted brother Jeb, which, suppressed for many years, comes to light after the gamble with the coin. The incestuous overtones of their mutual attraction are addressed directly when Thorley tells Jeb 'I was supposed to be your sister' and admits to her confusion over the years as sisterly feelings were overlaid with sexual ones. Thorley's shock at the result of the gamble, her anger with both young men for deciding such an important matter in such a frivolous way, and her fear of losing Jeb in the war, all contribute to her decision to abandon the pretence of sisterhood and admit to the reality of her feelings for Jeb. Adam tries to dissuade her from plans of marrying Jeb, reminding her of her place in the family home, but Thorley is incredulous that he would think the ranch could mean more to her than a husband. She hits back with the cutting observation that 'It's been a wife to you, Adam. Because you don't have a wife. You just have the ranch.' Whereas in Stevenson's novel the brothers compete to be accepted as the lover of the same 'near kinswoman' (11), in *Pursued* the blood-brother Adam and the adopted brother Jeb pitch the claims of family against the claims of eros as they compete for Thorley's love. Yet, despite these differences in circumstance, each contest produces a similar effect: like

Henry Durie, Adam is shut out of the erotic charge that exists between the other two 'children' of the household, and this is another factor fuelling his resentment and desire for revenge against Jeb.

It is clear that the coin toss functions as a narrative tool for the complication of the plot in both novel and film. But does it in either case create the truly open narrative form that Barthes imagined? A consideration of genre is crucial in answering this question. *Pursued* is a *film noir* in the guise of a Western. *The Master of Ballantrae* offers a psychological study of character within the incident-driven form of the adventure novel. In both texts, the mixing of genres is critical in enabling or disabling the role of chance within the plot.



In *Pursued* there are three points at which the course of the plot is determined by a gamble, a game of chance. The first, already discussed, is the coin toss that decides which brother will go to war. It is Jeb's idea to assign the selection to chance, and Thorley, who disapproves, upbraids him: 'That *would* be your way of deciding it.' Her comment suggests that Jeb has the same gambling nature that James exhibits in *The Master of Ballantrae*. When, after Jeb's return from the war, Adam makes clear that he is not welcome at the ranch, Jeb agrees that there is not room for both of them, and again suggests the toss of a coin to determine which should have the

farm and which should leave: 'Winner takes all.' The same coin is used (Jeb had held on to it as a keepsake), with the same result — Jeb loses. Adam's ungracious and aggressive response — he throws him out of the house and the family, denying him even his personal property — returns Jeb to the foundling, outsider status he had never ceased to have in Adam's eyes. This escalates the hostility between the brothers to murderous levels. The same night, Jeb gambles for a third time with his coin, on a game of roulette at a gambling establishment in town. 'You want some action for this dollar?' the proprietor, Jake Dingle, asks him.



This time he is lucky (although it is not truly luck, as it seems that, unknown to Jeb, Dingle has the game rigged in his favour); Jeb then stakes his winnings on a game of poker which brings him a fortune, restoring to him all that he forfeited in his gamble with Adam. From this point, Jeb's material fortunes are reversed and he prospers as a partner in the gambling house. But this change of luck makes no difference to the course of his psychological and emotional life, which is dogged by ill-fortune. A kind of fatality forces him to kill repeatedly in self-defence — first Adam, then an innocent admirer of Thorley's, Prentice McComber — and this costs him (for some time) the love of both Thorley and her mother, his adoptive

mother, Ma Callum (Judith Anderson). No matter which way the coin falls, Jeb seems doomed to destroy his own happiness.

To the viewer, but not to Jeb, it is evident that all Jeb's disasters are traceable to the malevolent influence of a kinsman of his adopted family. Grant Callum has pursued Jeb all his life, determined to destroy him in retribution for the death of Grant's brother in the Rand-Callum feud, which was sparked by the adulterous affair between Jeb's father and Ma Callum. Once Grant Callum's role in the story is grasped, it becomes apparent that the device of the coin toss is not much more than a striking piece of film rhetoric; it seems to drive the plot, but really just decorates it. The fall of a coin takes no account of the past; it is purely future-oriented. But everything in Jeb's life comes — to use the title of Mitchum's other great *noir* film of 1947 — out of the past. The *film noir* concern with the weight of the past and its enmeshing threads is given two specific inflections in *Pursued*. One is from Greek tragedy, which provides a sense of a predetermined destiny inexorably leading the hero to destruction. It matters very little whether Jeb goes to war or stays home, whether he keeps the ranch or loses it, whether he is rich or poor. His nemesis, Grant Callum, will still be shadowing him, whispering poison into the ears of those around him, inciting their hatred of him, forcing him to defend himself, locking him into the cycle of killing from which he cannot escape. If neither the Spaniards, nor Adam, nor poor Prentice kills Jeb first, Grant Callum will still be waiting to finish the job himself and fulfil his promise to kill every Rand in retribution for his brother's death in the feud sparked by the adultery of Jeb's father and Ma Callum.

The second inflection is from Freudian psychology, which dictates that Jeb cannot move forward with his life until he has recovered repressed memories from his traumatic childhood, and confronted the survivors of the previous generation whose loves and hates have determined the course of his own blighted life. Fragments of Jeb's repressed memories surface from time to time throughout his life; he calls them 'flashes', and they are visualised in the film as images of spurred boots dancing a strange ballet before the terrified eyes of a hiding child. We see the boots from the child's perspective, at floor level, and therefore, like Jeb, the viewer cannot identify their wearer or the context of their manic dance. (Later we learn that the feet belong to Jeb's father, frantically trying to defend his family on the night of the Callums' attack.) This metonymic relation to the buried past shifts to a

metaphoric one when Jeb rides as if led by an inner guide to the old Rand house, a place he does not know he knows, and makes an instant identification: 'That house was myself.' He claims the derelict house as a symbol of his damaged self, and realises that it must hold the answers he has always been seeking about his past. It is inevitable that he chooses the old house as his hideout when Grant Callum and his band come to kill him on his wedding-night. On the way to the house, he eludes his pursuers by urging his horse through a narrow cleft in the rock, so that he seems almost to have been swallowed up by the 'butte country' that is such a feature of the film's landscape photography. Going into the rock is like a reverse birth; it takes Jeb back to his origins and allows him, finally, to remember his traumatic childhood experience. Now he can recover those elusive, haunting memories, widen his angle of vision on the past, and put its fragments together as a meaningful narrative that explains his life.

Jeb comes to know the past by reliving it. The film ends where it begins, with an attack by the Callum clan on the Rand house. Going through this experience the second time enables Jeb to remember the first, and to understand why he has been pursued all his life. 'There was a black dog riding my back and yours too,' he tells Thorley. Jeb now understands Grant Callum's motivation — revenge for his brother's death in the gun battle at the ranch when Jeb was a child — and why Grant (who, not coincidentally, is a lawyer and the county prosecutor) has appointed himself Jeb's judge and executioner. For this time there will be no shootout: Grant Callum intends to hang Jeb for the crime of being a Rand. Now Jeb understands that his surname was his destiny; he has not caused or deserved his fate. One critic has argued that this diminishes the *noir* attributes of the film, as the protagonist is not morally implicated in his own suffering.¹³ However, the fact that Jeb's life has been wholly shaped by external forces increases the sense of his powerlessness to avert a predetermined outcome. As Grant says (referring to his decision to let Jeb grow up, rather than kill him as a child), 'Now he's grown and he gets his legacy — only it's made out of hemp.' Jeb is paying for the sins of his father, and Thorley's mother. Their adultery caused the clan feud that created for Jeb a fate as inexorable as if it had been decreed by the gods. Its power can only be broken when Ma Callum, who has consistently refused to confront the past, finally admits to her guilty part

¹³ Recchia, 'Film Noir and the Western,' 605-6.

in it. She shoots Grant, and liberates Jeb from the crushing weight of a history made by others.

All this makes for powerful melodrama, but the insistence on the ineluctible determining power of the past renders the gambling motif redundant. One cannot gamble with a destiny as implacable as that assigned to Jeb Rand. This is where the contrast with *The Master of Ballantrae* becomes most obvious, for Stevenson's novel keeps up a genuine interplay between chance, destiny and realistic causation as forces determining the course of events. Having been unwillingly drawn into the first game of chance, Henry participates in no further gambles of this kind, but James continues to make key choices on the toss of a coin. His friendship with the Irish Colonel Burke (one of the novel's two narrators) is determined in this way. On the run after the Jacobite defeat at Culloden, the two very dissimilar men fall in together, but quarrel. They decide that they must either fight, or agree to accept each other with all their respective faults. 'But which is it to be?', Burke asks, 'Fight or make friends?', and he records James Durie's answer:

'Why,' says he, 'I think it will be the best manner to spin a coin for it.'

This proposition was too highly chivalrous not to take my fancy, and, strange as it may seem of two well-born gentlemen of to-day, we span a half-crown (like a pair of ancient paladins) whether we were to cut each other's throats or be sworn friends. A more romantic circumstance can rarely have occurred; and it is one of those points in my memoirs, by which we may see the old tales of Homer and the poets are equally true to-day — at least, of the noble and the genteel. The coin fell for peace, and we shook hands upon our bargain. (34-35)

Burke, true to his aristocratic prejudices, finds the episode 'chivalrous', 'romantic', 'noble' and 'genteel', because it suggests an 'ancient' way of making decisions. A lazy thinker, Burke is drawn to the irrationality of James's proposition, as well as being charmed by his embrace of the poetry of risk.

The opposition between chance and reason is further emphasised later in Burke's narration. In their wanderings the exiled rebels are cast

upon American shores and endure great sufferings as they make their way through the wilderness, in perpetual fear of Indian attacks, and still trying to evade the British authorities. Lost in a strange land, Burke recalls,

Ballantrae often decid[ed] on our course by the spinning of a coin; and once, when I expostulated on this childishness, he had an odd remark that I have never forgotten. 'I know no better way,' said he, 'to express my scorn of human reason.' (58)

This utterance is placed post-1745, but it could be post-1945, so cynical is it, so absurdist, so disenchanted with Enlightenment values. Indeed, the two men's journey through the wilderness becomes an existentialist drama about the necessity, and impossibility, of choosing a course of action in an incomprehensible world. They hide from a group of Indians on the warpath, hideously uncertain whether these profoundly alien figures might represent their salvation or their destruction. Burke recalls:

I suppose I endured a greater agony of hesitation and suspense in these few minutes than goes usually to a man's whole life. Whether they were French or English Indians, whether they desired scalps or prisoners, whether we should declare ourselves upon the chance, or lie quiet and continue the heart-breaking business of our journey; sure, I think these were questions to have puzzled the brains of Aristotle himself. Ballantrae turned to me with a face all wrinkled up, and his teeth showing in his mouth, like what I have read of people starving; he said no word, but his whole appearance was a kind of dreadful question.

'They may be of the English side,' I whispered; 'and think! the best we could then hope, is to begin this over again.'

'I know — I know,' he said. 'Yet it must come to a plunge at last.' And he suddenly plucked out his coin, shook it in his closed hands, looked at it, and then lay down with his face in the dust. (59)

Burke's narration breaks off at this point, so we do not learn which way the coin fell or what the men did; the episode closes upon the memorable image of James Durie 'with his face in the dust', at an impasse from which neither chance nor reason can free him.

The chosen course of action was evidently not disastrous, for James Durie lives to fight another day, and another. 'I see a thousand openings' (180), he says, as he surveys the world's opportunities, and the toss of a coin might steer him towards any one of them. His gambling nature is linked to his chameleonic identity. Throughout the novel he repeatedly turns up in different lands and different guises: in France he appears as a cavalier, in America a pirate; in India, most amusingly, a Hindustani-speaking nabob. The many costume changes indicate that, for James Durie, the world is a stage for a potentially endless series of improvised roles. His career is ideally suited to the episodic form of the adventure story, and allows Stevenson to fulfil his aim to write 'a story of many years and countries, of the sea and the land, savagery and civilisation', a story 'committed to great spaces and voyages',¹⁴ as Stevenson himself was in the course of writing it. The novel was begun at Saranac Lake in upper New York State towards the end of 1887, continued in Tahiti the following year, and completed in Hawaii in 1889. It is easy to see reflections of the peripatetic author in his wandering hero; Adrian Poole suggests an even deeper connection. In a gloss upon Stevenson's admission that 'the original [for James Durie] was no other than myself',¹⁵ Poole comments that 'Stevenson positively courted the abrupt and the discontinuous, and made it, in this tale as nowhere else, part of his subject. If only writing could be as risky as living, like a hazard or gamble or toss of the coin'.¹⁶

In his constant pursuit of 'openings' (180) James is an expansive force within the narrative; his ambition, which is truly imperial in scale, encompasses two hemispheres and renews itself through diversification. James's willingness to keep beginning again, making a new life and a new identity wherever chance and circumstances take him — in America, France, or India — contrasts with Henry's certainty that the brothers share a destiny, and that '[w]herever I am, there will he be' (119), even to the grave. Thus, the quintessentially modern sense of randomness and uncertainty brought to the story by James's attachment to chance co-exists and contends with Henry's belief in fate, so characteristic of ancient narratives. In the end, Henry's vision seems to prevail, for the brothers are

¹⁴ Stevenson, 'Note to *The Master of Ballantrae*' (1893-4) in *The Master of Ballantrae*, 222, 225.

¹⁵ Stevenson, 'Note to *The Master of Ballantrae*', 227.

¹⁶ Poole, 'Introduction', ix.

unable to escape the course of mutual destruction he has long predicted. James's obsessive hatred of his brother comes to dominate, and narrow, his perspective. He comes to see his life as 'a series of unmerited cast-backs' (180), a sequence of conspiracies against his talent, optimism and inventiveness, for all of which — irrationally — he holds responsible the brother who lost the toss and did not go to war. Triumph in their quarrel becomes the 'one thing' (181) for which James willingly trades the multifarious world and its 'thousand openings' (180).

While James's expansive and Henry's convergent visions pull the plot in opposite directions, the open and the closed forms of narrative they represent both find their way into the account of the novel's primary narrator, Ephraim Mackellar. Full of dark hints about a future already past to him, Mackellar often makes the novel's tragic ending seem ineluctable, but his own attempts to divert the course of the story by blackmailing, bribing, or even murdering James Durie show an increasingly desperate desire to keep the plot open and avoid the seemingly predestined end. When that end comes, the brothers and the story have wandered far from where they began, testimony again to the plot-expanding drive of James's opportunism as well as to the teleological force of Henry's fatalism. There is a sense of destiny fulfilled, but in an unexpected way, and not through the return to origins that gives *Pursued* such a tightly closed form.

Near the beginning of *Pursued* there is a prediction, which, like so much else in the film, looks forward only to look back. 'This is where it started, this is where it's going to end', announces Jeb, before launching into the retrospective narration that constitutes the bulk of the film. Like all stories governed by destiny and announced in prophecy, *Pursued* is a closed narrative: its ending is foreseen in and dictated by its beginning; it cannot deviate from its predestined path, or adopt a new one, no matter how many times the hero tries to hand the plot over to chance.¹⁷ This sense of

¹⁷ These plot constraints are seen as a shortcoming by Recchia, who argues that the film's direction and photography seem to promise 'a more complicated moral and psychological dilemma than the actual plot delivers' ('Film Noir and the Western,' 605). However, Willemsen's Freudian/Lacanian reading ('The Fugitive Subject') demonstrates that a closed narrative does not preclude symbolic richness: he finds in the film a complex structure of mirroring and replication that repeats and elaborates, but cannot move beyond, Jeb's 'primal scene', the suppressed memory of parental transgression.

foreclosure is reinforced by the film's structure of narrative repetition. The scene of Jeb and Adam fighting in the yard as children is repeated in the scene of the two fighting in the same place, as grown men, after the second coin toss. The scene in which Jeb as a child, riding through open country, is shot at by an unseen assailant whom he believes to be Adam, is repeated in a matching scene in which, as an adult riding through the same landscape, he is shot at by an unseen assailant who turns out to be Adam. Such repetitions create a nightmarish sense of enclosure within a narrowly determined range of incidents — the opposite of Barthes' indeterminate text, where 'the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*'.¹⁸

The completely open, indeterminate, plural text is an idea, 'not a thing', as Barthes admitted; 'we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore'.¹⁹ A comparative study of *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Pursued* helps to show why this should be. First, it is difficult for a serious narrative to sustain the 'scorn of human reason' (58), or human reasons, that a fully chance-determined plot expresses. In James Durie there is an element of the inhuman, of indifference to the human, which makes many of his actions arbitrary, but in the end even he succumbs to the pull of human motivation in his obsessive hatred for his brother. The other characters in *The Master of Ballantrae*, and all the characters in *Pursued*, are driven by the kinds of attachments and desires that make narrative an essentially humanist form. Second, different narrative genres allow different degrees of force to the operation of chance. In the forward-looking, incident-driven, episodic form of the adventure story, chance can function freely as a determinant of plot. In the novel of character it is subordinate to psychological factors, and in *film noir* it is subservient both to character and to the force of the past in determining the present. For these reasons, neither *The Master of Ballantrae* nor *Pursued* is the kind of text Barthes theorised, free from all principles of determination except chance, although of the two, Stevenson's novel comes closer to Barthes' idea. The gambling motif is intrinsic to one narrative strand of *The Master of Ballantrae*, marking the new beginnings and chance directions of the adventure story, which contend in this generically hybrid text against the formal unities and continuities of the psychological novel. But the same motif is ultimately irrelevant to the narrative logic of *Pursued*,

¹⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, 5-6.

¹⁹ Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

in which a *noir* sense of the all-determining, inescapable past obliterates the power of either chance or individual will to alter the course of events.

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